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ABSTRACT

Fifty teachers from the St. Louis, Missouri area have been involved in a project to bring the development strategies used by the Reggio Emilia preschools in Italy to the United States. Their experiences suggest that teachers need to adopt professional development plans that identify goals, select methods of support to achieve these goals, plan for data collection to examine progress towards the goals, and identify additional resource needs. The teachers have found that the Reggio Emilia approach forces teachers to examine their own attitudes toward the classroom environment, the use of time in the classroom, and their involvement in children's learning. They have also found that Reggio Emilia-style classrooms are noisier, operate at a slower and more child-centered pace, encourage discovery learning, and allow children to reflect on their own learning. American teachers utilizing the Reggio Emilia approach have found that it is important for teachers to: (1) approach old class activities in new ways; (2) explore various representational media; (3) plan for emergent curriculum; (4) make better use of class and planning time; (5) engage in meaningful collaboration, sharing, and criticism of ideas and techniques; and (6) support parent involvement. Guidelines for Identifying Goals for 1993-94 and a Professional Development Plan form are included. (MDM)

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Images from St. Louis: considerations and interpretations from teachers who are applying the Reggio approach in the United States

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I will base these remarks on my work with Louise Cadwell, one of three American educators who have interned for a year in Reggio Emilia; Jan Phillips, Director of The College School; and 50 teachers from the St. Louis area who have been involved in a grant project designed to provide a professional development support system for the study and application of the Reggio approach to early childhood education. Although the educators involved have common interests and experiences in regard to the study of the Reggio approach, each has come into the project with different backgrounds of experience, levels of education, understandings of Constructivism and from different kinds of work contexts. The project includes teachers of infants, toddlers, preschool age children, kindergarten, first and second grades. Art educators and administrators are also included. These educators work in private and public programs in both city and county locations. The families of children served range from low to high socio-economic status.

The Professional Development System

The system of support presented in the slide has evolved over the two year period of our Danforth Foundation grant. (The slide to be shown here is presented on the attached page.) When designing this set of professional development opportunities we took into consideration the critical attributes of effective teacher development programs in the U.S.; we studied the system of support for professional development established in Reggio Emilia; and we assessed the needs and interests of teachers, administrators, and parents in our project. We have attempted to establisn a network of relations among all of the members of our learning community.

Teachers have developed individualized or group professional development plans to help bring focus to their study. I have strongly encouraged the latter in order to promote interdependence and collaboration among teachers who work together. Those who have chosen to do this have, as expected, had more incentive to engage in continuous discussion and interpretation of their collective work. Even when teachers do not develop interdependent professional development plans, their written plans serve as a vehicles for communication with other teachers and administrators.

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The Danforth Foundation Reggio Grant Project
St. Louis, Missouri

Professional Development Support
for Teachers

The format for the professional development plan (see attachment) guides teachers in 1) selecting goals; 2) identifying methods of support which could help them achieve their goals; 3) planning the kinds of evidence or data which could be collected through the year to help them analyze progress toward goals; and 4) identifying resources or additional information needed. An analysis of these plans has helped the co-directors of the project to make better decisions about programming and allocation of resources from the grant.

Considerations and Interpretations of Change

Teachers in our project have made significant progress in their study and implementation of principles and practices from Reggio. I will use slides to illustrate some of their insights and change in practice. I will comment on what I perceive to be some of the underlying barriers to change which are embedded in fundamental beliefs and values in our society. I will also share some teacher quandaries related to interpretations or misinterpretations of principles of developmentally appropriate practice.

Environmental Change

Many teachers choose to begin with environmental changes. They attempt to organize more aesthetically pleasing environments, to offer a richer and more varied assortment of materials, and to establish more physical connections with home. These are concrete ways in which teachers have embraced what they have seen as valuable features of the learning environments of the Reggio schools. (Slides will illustrate specific changes related to these ideas.)

One unexpected problem related to environments surfaced when teachers first began to emulate the Reggio practice of tape recording children's conversations. As teachers listened to tapes they became cognizant of distracting background noise. It became evident that their environments do not support dialogue and serious discussion. In processing this observation, many teachers reflected that they had gone too far in their interpretation of the idea that active learning is noisy. This consideration had inadvertently caused them to fail to consider the need for spaces where children and teachers can listen intently to each other and work without distraction. Unfortunately, most schools have little or no space that is protected in this way. Many schools are now struggling to find the resources to rennovate space for this purpose.

Visual images of Reggio classrooms have challenged our teachers to re-think a commonly held belief among early childhood educators that everything in the room must be low and accessible to the child. They have come to recognize the need to balance this idea with the importance of making classrooms feel more homelike. At home the walls are decorated with objects, pictures and accessories which are not intended to be handled, but are there to reflect interests, values and the culture of the family.

The concept of the "environment as the third teacher" is somewhat difficult for teachers to fully or deeply comprehend. It is tied to their changing image of the child, their understanding of the concept of scaffolding, their use of documentation, their ways of thinking about organization of time and relations among all members of the learning community.

Implications of Slowing Down to Listen

Many teachers comment that as they pursue the goal to listen more effectively to children, they have learned to "slow down." In order to listen, they must spend more focused time with individual children or small groups of children. For many teachers this means changing an established pattern of constant movement from one table or activity area to the next to monitor and facilitate or manage behavior. In reflecting on the need for this kind of change teachers have recognized that not only had their former pattern of behavior prevented them from listening to children, but it had also inadvertently kept them from modeling focused behavior and perseverance.

While slowing down seems like a simple change, it requires teachers to re-organize themselves, their time, the environment and their relations with co-teachers.

Many teachers who wish to slow down must also re-think their values and concepts about equity. For example, several teachers have shared a concern that it may not be fair for a teacher to spend a lot of time with a few children. The implication is that the other children are being neglected. One teacher commented, "I wish I had that luxury." Teachers often operate on a belief that they must be responsive and available to all children at all times. The change toward slowing down, listening to children, and working with small groups forces teachers to deal with the dilemma within them about equal allocation of time and resources vs. differential allocation of time and resources.

On another level, this same kind of tension and dilemma is experienced when teachers try to move toward a more collaborative approach to teaching. Equitable distribution of work among teachers has often meant equal or same distribution of work. For example, in a room of 20 children and 2 teachers, each teacher might work with 10 children or each of them would do the same kind of "floating facilitation" with all children. Although it would seem to be a simple matter for teachers to re-organize themselves to allow for one to work with a small group while the other supervised the larger group, this has not been easy. In situations where teachers are forging new relationships with an atelierista, these issues must also be addressed. As one teacher explained, "Personal interpretations of shared responsibility vary tremendously." In most American schools, teachers and specialists have worked separately. Team planning, role release and collaborative decision making mean coordination of work rather than pure division of work.

Slowing down seems to run counter to our traditional value and understanding of productivity. Parents and teachers often equate productivity with how many acitivities are completed in a day, how much of the curriculum is covered in a given period of time or how many facts and formulas can be memorized. Teachers who are "slowing down" have learned to value the process of exploring children's ideas, theories, questions, and opinions. A major challenge for them is in convincing parents to make this shift.

One more teacher insight and change of behavior related to this theme of slowing down is that experience must be connected with reflection. One teacher explained that she used to "wow" the kids. She would plan exciting, entertaining and flashy activities. Each day the children would experience something new. Now, she says that she and her co-teachers have come to look at school as a place for children to pursue their interests, to experience, reflect and revisit. Value is placed on perseverance and depth of learning rather than fast action, fast paced superficial experience.

Scaffolding vs. Interference

All teachers, at one time or another, question whether given interventions help or harm a child. "Should I tell the child the answer?" "Should I show her how to do it?" "Should I ask her to tell me why she chose to use that color paint? When are we interfering with a child's creative process?"

Although teachers will probably always struggle with these kinds of questions, many of our teachers are beginning to learn that they are in a much better position to make these decisions when they take the time to closely observe, listen and dialogue with children. Through these efforts they are learning to enter the child's world without disrupting or diverting the flow of a child's work or intentions.

Dorris, a teacher of three year olds, discovered this when she decided last fall to study how her children approach painting at the easel. (Slides will be shown here to illustrate.) She sat next to children as they painted and then recorded what she saw. She noticed how children held the brush, how they used it to pick up paint, how they applied paint to paper, where on the paper they chose to begin the painting, what kinds of strokes and movements they made with the brush, how much and what parts of the paper were painted, what the children said while painting, etc. After a short time the children became curious about what she was doing and asked what she was writing. She shared many of her observations. As a result, children became involved in talking with her about not only what they did but what effect their actions had on the painting. What evolved from a simple plan to observe children turned into an opportunity to help children become reflective about their experience. This teacher learned that close observation can naturally lead to good teaching. She was most certainly scaffolding a learning situation through her close observation and responsiveness to children's questions and invitations to interact. There was no question in this teacher's mind about whether she was being intrusive or interferring with the flow of a child's creative expression.

Advice from Teachers

There are many, many more considerations, interpretations, and difficulties which could be shared, but in this short time I will touch lightly on a few pieces of advice given by teachers in our project. (Slides will be used to present the following points:

1. Approach old activities in new ways.

(With slides I will show how one teacher proceeded with her usual study of the colors, textures, sights and sounds of fall with some new twists. She added the component of revisiting experiences by capturing visual memories through photography. She encouraged childrer to carefully examine and discuss their collections of fall leaves and twigs. She engaged a small group of children in a discussion about their theories on why leaves fall from trees.

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The advice is to remember that change must happen gradually and be connected to prior learning. One teacher stated, "You must be willing to give up some of your old ways, but be careful not to create a void. You need to exchange or adapt former methods of teaching."

2. Explore the hundred languages.

Adults and children need to become familiar with the physical properties of different representational media. We are trying to understanding the first elements, the simplest rudiments of these media in order to establish an alphabet with which we can communicate and construct knowledge.

(Slides will show teachers and children exploring media such as clay, paper, paint, markers, and natural materials.)

3. Plan for emergent curriculum.

Some teachers, upon first hearing that curriculum in Reggio is not established in advance, take this to mean that little or no advance planning can be done. It has been very difficult for many of them to learn how to plan for possibilities, to hypothesize directions for projects, to express general goals and to plan ways to provoke and/or sustain children's interest. They recognize that it is important to study the ideas expressed in children's words, drawings, painting and play. They know that this will help them learn how to scaffold further learning, but the process of interpreting dialogue and hypothesizing possible lines of a project is often both strange and unfamiliar.

4. Reconsider time.

We need more time; we need to make better use of our time; we need to think about time in different ways. Many of the issues already discussed are connected to these issues. Collaboration among teachers requires time for group planning, sharing and reflection. Many teachers feel that insufficient time is built into the work schedule for this. On the other hand, many have come to realize that some of the time which is available for group planning is used inefficiently. Teachers are beginning to recognize the kinds of advance preparation and organization needed for productive group meetings. Perhaps Reggio teachers could help us to better understand how they do this.

5. Collaboration can be wonderful, wearing and wretched. You must persevere.

Our support network has been a delightful source of energy, release, and growth for teachers. Discussion is lively and ideas flow as we share, reflect and study together. The wearing and wretched sides of collaboration surface when we try to go further - to debate, critique and coordinate points of view. We find it very difficult to deal with hard critique, to let go of ownership of ideas and to question our certainties. This is even more challenging in the daily work setting. Working out relationships based on interdependence and mutual respect is quite demanding, to say the least.

6. Parent involvement is essential.

All of the considerations and interpretations already described must be processed with parents. Although all of our teachers have taken some steps to increase family participation and to establish a climate of openess and two-way communication, we have decided that in the coming year we will try to support teachers in learning how to process the Reggio approach with parents by inviting more parents to participate in the monthly grant group meetings. This will move them into the inner circle of our network and make them true partners in the learning process. We will benefit from the parent perspective that they will bring to our discussions.

Conclusion

Our experience underscores what the literature on change process has so clearly stated. We must remember that change can be a journey into incompetence. The individual must be respected, supported, and valued throughout the process. By creating collegial and collaborative relationships we support individual and organizational change. We need to provide the necessary resources of time, money, materials and education. We need to grow in our ability to use conflict as a source of learning. And finally, we need to involve all participants affected by the change.

Guidelines for Identifying Goals for 1993-94

If you have not already identified specific or general goals for the year, consider the folowing questions:

1. What interests you most about the Reggio approach?

2. What do you want to change about your teaching?

3. Where would you like to start in your experimentation with Reggio ideas? How will you begin?

4. What are you already doing that seems consistent with the Social Constructivist approach of Reggio Emilia? How could you build on that?

5. Consider some of the following areas for professional development:

   * build or refine the environment to support interactions and communication among children, teachers and parents
   * create an environment which reflects the ideas, ethics, attitudes and life-style of children, teachers, parents and community
   * gain a deeper understanding of the hundred languages of children
   * learn how to listen more effectively to children in order to enter the child's world and support him in identifying and answering his own questions
   * learn how to help children revisit experiences in order to reflect and infer
   * learn how to support children in the use of graphic representation as a means of constructing knowledge (e.g. draw to learn)
   * learn how to plan for the possibilities of a project study
   * learn better ways to document the processes of learning
   * become better able to analyze documentation in order to determine ways to support children's learning
   * learn better ways to work with parents as partners in the development, analysis, and implementation of curriculum
   * learn more effective techniques of communicating with parents

Professional Development Plan

Teacher(s)_____ Date_____ School _____

1. Selected goals:

2. Methods of support for professional development:
   * mentoring
   * clinical supervision
   * peer support group
   * peer coaching
   * individualized plan

   If colleagues, administrators, or consultants are to be involved, identify them here.

3. Evidence/data to be collected through the year to help me analyze progress toward my goals:

(e.g. video tape analyses, audio tape analyses, photographic documentation and analyses, journal, child growth measures, behavior performance samples, observations, artifacts, written observations by colleagues)

4. What kind of information, resources or support do you need at this time?